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Joint Inspection Unit

Report of the Joint Inspection Unit on the review of management of Internet websites in the United Nations system organizations

Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit herewith, for the consideration of the General Assembly, his comments and those of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "Review of management of Internet websites in the United Nations system organizations" (JIU/REP/2008/6).

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Summary

The Joint Inspection Unit report entitled "Review of management of Internet websites in the United Nations system organizations" explores the key factors that determine successful website management and examines the issues of website governance, strategy, standards, training and funding.

The present report sets out the views of United Nations system organizations on the recommendations provided in the report of the Joint Inspection Unit. The views of the system have been consolidated on the basis of inputs provided by member organizations of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination, which welcome the report and note that the Web is becoming their primary communications channel for contact with a wide range of stakeholders. Most agencies report that they have struggled with the challenges of unifying their Web presence through streamlined Web content management. Agencies generally agree with the recommendations, with some reservations, and suggest that future studies in this area should give consideration to the application and utility of the Web beyond institutional outreach.

I. Introduction

1. The Joint Inspection Unit report entitled "Review of management of Internet websites in the United Nations system organizations" assesses the effectiveness and efficiency of the use of Internet websites as a communication tool for information dissemination. The report explores the key factors that determine successful website management and examines the issues of website governance, strategy, standards, training and funding. The aim of the recommendations contained in the report is to strengthen the operation and management of organizations' Internet websites as well as improve coordination within the system on the implementation of this communications medium.

II. General comments

2. The members of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) welcome the report and agree in principle with many of its findings and recommendations. They note that the Web is becoming the primary communications channel for all United Nations agencies and that agencies face various challenges when unifying their Web presence through streamlined content and the application of consistent online virtual branding.

3. Organizations note that the report addresses the issue of websites that are accessible to the public, and does not review other Web initiatives, such as extranets or intranets, which normally have restricted access. However, organizations point out that such distinctions are rapidly diminishing as they create websites with areas that contain content open to the public, while other areas contain restricted content and require registration and passwords. They further indicate that the report could have been strengthened through the collection and examination of user satisfaction data and by linking the recommendations to an increase in website usability as perceived by the target audience.

4. CEB members also note that future studies in this area may consider the application and utility of the Web beyond institutional outreach. Many organizations already leverage the Web, and the Internet in general, as a tool for innovation. United Nations websites are rapidly becoming a platform for discussion and information exchange among all stakeholders, including Member States, and this aspect should be explored in future reports.

5. Finally, organizations have taken note of recent General Assembly recommendations that have a bearing on many of the recommendations contained in the report of the Joint Inspection Unit, including on Internet governance (resolution 63/262), public information policies (resolution 63/100), multilingualism (resolutions 63/100 B, 61/266 and 60/109 B), accessibility (resolutions 63/192 and 63/100), the digital divide (resolution 63/202) and content management (resolutions 63/262 and 63/100), which they believe will have bearing on the development of productive websites.

III. Specific comments on recommendations

Recommendation 1

The executive head of each United Nations system organization should ensure that clear policies and corresponding mechanisms are adopted for the good governance and management of the organization's website.

6. Agencies support this recommendation, but suggest that, if they are to be effective, governance mechanisms, strategies and policies should be used to support implementing entities and not to penalize for non-compliance. They note that voluntary standards that stress interoperability are more likely to succeed than strict technical standards, even when these have been negotiated in good faith by all parties concerned. Furthermore, technical standards are more likely to be adopted if they are accompanied by technical assistance. They further suggest that, instead of establishing governing bodies that issue directives to other units (centralized command and control), it would be preferable to establish an advisory group that assists those same units with identification and take-up of good practices (coaching and support).

Recommendation 2

The executive heads of each United Nations system organization should ensure that the website strategy is regularly updated and linked with and takes account of the other business strategies of the organization and report on the measures taken to the governing body on a regular basis.

7. Organizations generally support this recommendation, especially with regard to the need for regular updates given the evolving nature of the Web. However, organizations caution that strong linkages between business and website strategies can, in some cases, result in a fragmented approach to the Web, owing to the number of business strategies (communications, operations, development, etc.) that may be in place across an organization, and this possibility needs to be guarded against when taking account of business directions.

Recommendation 3

The executive head of each United Nations system organization should ensure that policies and guidelines are in place that, among other things, specify requirements and standards relating to (a) Web layout and design; (b) editorial control and review of Web content; and (c) Web accessibility.

8. Organizations agree with and support this recommendation. They stress, however, that, while requirements and standards are necessary, their application should remain sufficiently flexible so as not to prevent or freeze specific developments. They also note that, especially in large, diverse organizations, website policies and guidelines should take into consideration the fact that the user market is highly segmented and different units within them serve different, highly specialized user groups. In such organizations, the philosophy of a "federated"

approach, linking separate but specialized websites, as opposed to the principle of a centralized or uniform approach, would prove more effective and sustainable.

Recommendation 4

For relevant, timely and high quality website content, the executive head of each United Nations system organization should ensure the implementation of a content management system which offers full support to Latin, non-Latin and bidirectional scripts and, as far as practicable, is compatible with content management systems used by other organizations. When selecting an appropriate content management system, they should give serious consideration to adopting common information exchange standards and also consider the benefits of a common content management system across the United Nations system.

9. Agencies of the United Nations system support this recommendation and many note that they already utilize content management system products that deliver their website in Latin, non-Latin and bidirectional scripts. They note the linkage between this and recommendations 1 and 3, in that a content management system can prove effective in applying and enforcing standard website elements across an organization. Agencies suggest adding a further element, specifically the ability of the content management system to deliver Web content to high-latency and low-bandwidth users in order to reach populations in areas without a high-speed Internet connection. Some organizations stress that while a content management system proves extremely useful in allowing content to be developed by non-technical individuals, the design and delivery of an effective website still requires the skills of an experienced Web architect. However, while agencies agree with the need for these systems, they note that a common content management system may not prove practical in the short term.

Recommendation 5

The executive head of each United Nations system organization should ensure that sufficient and sustained funding for staffing and training is allocated to website management. If such funding could not be provided through redeployment or other means, it should be reported to the governing body for its consideration in order to implement those recommendations contained in the report, which have financial implications, inter alia, content management systems, staffing, training, language parity, adoption of common information exchange standards, etc.

10. CEB members strongly support this recommendation and many note that existing resources for Web development and delivery are highly limited. However, organizations suggest that an analysis of the level of funding considered "sufficient", which could have provided benchmarks against which organizations could measure their existing investments, would have proved useful. They note that without such an analysis, it can be difficult for organizations to assess the feasibility of this recommendation and the priority of website development over other resource needs within an institution.

Recommendation 6

The governing bodies of the United Nations system organizations should establish an ad hoc committee dealing with the implementation of multilingualism on their corporate websites. The governing bodies shall review the report submitted by the ad hoc committee on the measures and financial implications to achieve language parity on their websites and take appropriate action.

11. While organizations support the spirit of this recommendation, they express reservations regarding its implementation, on the basis of both the costs involved in achieving language parity and the need to integrate language requirements into the overall Web strategy. They further note that multilingualism should be viewed not simply as the challenge of translating content from English into other languages, but as a means of developing the capacity to create original content in other languages, which will require support from an organization at all levels.

Recommendation 7

The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations should establish a mechanism reporting to the High-level Committee on Management, with the participation of all stakeholders, for coordination purposes and to establish common policies, standards and guidelines on websites.

12. CEB members stress that, rather than construct a new mechanism for Web consultation, the United Nations system should build upon existing information and communications technology and Web consultation machinery under CEB, including the High-level Committee on Programmes and the High-level Committee on Management (which looks strictly at the information and communications technology aspects of websites). In this regard, agencies agree that consultations on the coordination of common policies, standards and guidelines should be entrusted to an existing inter-agency body, such as the United Nations Communications Group, that is more qualified to address such website issues.

13. In addition, some agencies note that, while it is important to establish common policies, standards and guidelines for United Nations websites, it is necessary first for departments within agencies to create coherent websites that conform to existing and common standards. Only then will it make sense to coordinate and standardize further at the global level.

Recommendation 8

The governing bodies of United Nations system organizations should request the executive heads to report to their next session on the implementation of the recommendations contained in the report addressed to the executive heads, in particular those aimed at reforming website governance, updating website strategy and policy, and implementing multilingualism.

14. CEB members generally agree with this recommendation; however, many indicate that they already have specific processes for following up on Joint Inspection Unit recommendations with their governing bodies.